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Returning to the Novel *Planet of Death*: A Chronotopic Exploration

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Abstract

A rereading of Robert Silverberg's (1967) young adult novel *Planet of Death*, occurring as part of a qualitative self-study four decades after this book had been a site of independent repeated reading over the course of my Grade Five school year, offers a chronotopic perspective of the literary motivations and habits in one young girl. Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptualization of the literary chronotope is used to identify elements of time and space related to my transaction with Silverberg's book. Seen through a chronotopic lens, reading appears as a compelling travel opportunity in terms of gender, culture, ability, and age. Rather than developing deeper insights through rereading, it is argued that the threshold of understanding that was reached in an initial reading of this novel was replicated through a series of time-travel experiences that were otherwise rewarding across a span of at least 12 readings during a single school year. Rereading is identified here as an "internal" chronotope that operates as a mechanism for cruise-controlled intellectual travel through which to safely observe, enjoy and repeatedly entertain perspectives other than one's own. Rereading is also identified here as an opportunity to access an "external" chronotope that presents earlier versions of the reader, increasing motivation for reading as well as providing material to support identity studies. Implications from this self-study relate to the importance of offering opportunities for in-school rereading and deeper understandings about the value of this activity.

Keywords: rereading, qualitative self-study, chronotope

RETURNING TO THE NOVEL *PLANET OF DEATH*: A CHRONOTOPIC EXPLORATION**Perspectives on the Rereading of Texts**

Previous discussions of rereading have narrowly focused on comprehension of text, with evidence to suggest that rereading generally supports increased comprehension for aesthetic purposes (Booth, 2001; Monahan, 2008) as well as evidence indicating the ineffectiveness of rereading in generating increased comprehension of academic texts (Callender & McDaniel, 2009). Translating this into more practical terms, rereading seems to be equated with increased opportunities for reader-response without necessarily offering benefits in extended understanding from an efferent stance. Rereading has also been described as offering readers the potential to consider their own layered responses to texts over time—an outcome that may deepen interest in reading as well as personal understandings in relation to identity (Brenna, 2010).

As an elementary teacher, I rarely considered the value of re-reading other than for enhancing fluency through activities such as choral speech, working to consider the importance of expression and comprehension alongside accuracy (Allington, 2009). My own history of personal rereading bumps up against this narrow understanding of rereading, repeatedly drawing my attention back in time to myself as a child. What value did rereading pose for me in my elementary-school days? What might I learn from my own experiences that could influence my contemporary practice as a teacher educator? As I began to shift my thinking back to my childhood rereading experiences, these key research questions aligned with my valuing of experiential-based knowledge, setting the groundwork for the current research. More recently, a profoundly interesting auto-bibliography of one child reading (Mackey, 2016) further inspired me to consider a more targeted self-study on this subject, framing my curiosity with the singular purpose of enhancing my current understandings of the teaching of reading through exploring

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my recollections of a particular period of rereading in my own reading history and reporting on these recollections with insider knowledge.

The Landscape of My Childhood Rereading

My consideration of repeated reading in this self-study relates to the memory I have of particular engagement with a young adult novel called *Planet of Death*, written by Robert Silverberg, and published in 1969 by Holt, Rinehart & Winston. I recall reading this book repeatedly as a nine and ten-year-old during my Grade Five school year. I have a clear mental image of the borrowers' card where I recall noticing that one side of the card and most of the reverse was filled with my printed name—the method of signing out school library books in those days. Noteworthy is that there were no other names recorded there—meaning that I was returning the book and borrowing it again without interference from any other would-be readers.

While I diligently returned the book after every reading, and then just as diligently located it and borrowed it again a few days later, Mrs. M., the librarian, at no time made reference to the fact that I was engaging in what must have been a fairly unique rereading activity, particularly as the number of rereadings crept into the double digits. In addition, no attention was drawn to the fact that alongside this book, the only other books I was reading at the time were illustrated versions of the now controversial “Uncle Remus” stories and lengthy but rather worn volumes of fairy tale anthologies (*The Blue Fairy Book*, etc.) with the exception of a single reading of Booth Tarkington's *Penrod* towards the close of that year. At my father's encouragement, I had begun recording in a notebook at home the names of the books I was reading, and while I no longer have access to this notebook, I do recall the titles listed that year, possibly because there were so few of them. Important to note here is that *Planet of Death* seems to be quite different from the other reading I was doing and unrelated to my consistent

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preferences over time regarding theme or style. As I began to think about this rereading experience, as a prelude to a self-study in its regard, I wondered what magic that book held for me at that time.

My recollections of the book are quite clear, just as I recall the other students in my class and events that happened during that school year including the unexpected parting from a beloved teacher, Mrs. G., who moved away mid-year, and her replacement, Mr. K., a jeans-wearing guitar-playing favorite of many of my peers, who sang to us but did not read aloud. Mrs. G. is fondly remembered for reading Marguerite de Jong's *House of Sixty Fathers* to us, and is one of the few teachers in my school career who read to us at all. Other than the move of my teacher (occurring after the repeated readings had begun), the year (and my home life) were very stable.

The Inception of this Qualitative Self-Study

As a teacher-educator in English Language Arts curriculum studies at the university level, I engage often in discussion topics with my students about reading and books for young people. The topic of rereading briefly appears in our coursework and one of the connections I make is related to my own experience of rereading this particular novel—*Planet of Death*—as a personally motivated activity during middle elementary school. Through interactions with other readers, I have perceived that my childhood treatment of this novel was rather unusual, although at times others have related similar rereading proclivities, often with adult intervention to “try something new.” The only other examples brought to me about what might be described as obsessive rereading relate to children whose home lives were unsteady and who were seeking a validation of experience through readings of traumatic events to which they could relate. As my own reasons for rereading were not related to such validation, I began to wonder what in fact my

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impetus was for indulgence in *Planet of Death* so many times, and I took steps to locate the novel and see what kind of chronotopic information (Bakhtin, 1981) might come to light during a contemporary reading. I anticipated, as did Mackey (2016) at the beginning of her auto-bibliographical journey, the “potential to develop a deeper understanding of the complex internal world of reading” (p. 7). At first, however, I was unable to locate a copy of the book despite a search through both public and university library catalogues, but with support from colleagues, I eventually received it through an interlibrary loan.

The Literary Chronotope

A chronotope is a concept about time-space that Bakhtin (1981) adapted from Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and applied to literary studies. Most important for the discussion at hand is the conceptualization of the chronotope as a lens through which to analyze the travelling possibilities of my previous readings—capturing an “internal” chronotope (Brenna, 2010) at work. Through a contemporary self-study, I also anticipated that a current rereading could offer a chronotopic picture of this grade five reader, thus also illustrating an “external” chronotope (Brenna, 2010) in action—allowing me to time travel back to the period of the initial reading experiences with this book. As novels go, I remembered that this one was quite adventuresome—a futuristic fantasy whose plot turned on the idea of a crew of seasoned professionals sent to explore a new and dangerous planet. But in terms of characters or actual events, I could recollect nothing.

McClay (2005) discusses Bakhtin’s conceptualization of the chronotope in her example of a parody she wrote after the performance of a high school play. Now, years later, the parody conjures up connections between space and time that are intriguing in the manner in which they inspire reminiscence, going beyond literal interpretation into the encapsulation of McClay’s

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adolescent identity as a context for the writing. Ingemark (2006) explores how a particular element in fiction, enchantment, influences characters on a number of chronotopic levels including perception, their sense of the body and its location in space, and personality. Mackey (1991) discusses the chronotope in reference to Ramona Quimby, a character in children's fiction whom, Mackey argues, is positioned in time, place, and culture.

A previous study of mine addresses what I perceive to be "internal" and "external" chronotopes at work as readers move through time and space in the context of their reading as well as in considering themselves reading an earlier text (Brenna, 2010). As I pondered a possible self-study related to *Planet of Death*, in addition to the "internal" movement of the girl inside the early readings of the novel, I also anticipated that an examination of the chronotope external to my 1971/72 relationship with the Silverberg text might offer a picture of the young girl who read it. Such an "external" chronotope might convey me, the adult reader, back in time to when a younger version of my reading self was available. Information from either the internal or external chronotope might shed further light on the reading experience of others, allowing some conjecture about classroom application. A contemporary exploration of the book *Planet of Death*, I thought, could be quite interesting on all counts. If only I could find it! As I began the hunt, I was quickly discouraged—nothing showed up under this title in the public or university library collections to which I had easy access, it was no longer in our school library system, and it didn't appear on Amazon.

Planet of Death Located

In the winter of 2013, I was speaking to a group of librarians at an American Library Association conference when I happened to mention my early enthrallment with the novel *Planet of Death* and my inability to locate it from contemporary sources. One librarian took up the

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challenge and contacted me a week or so later indicating that she had found mention of the book on World Cat and offered a Canadian location from where it might be requested as well as further information in its regard—namely the publication date and the author.

I followed her tip and requested the book through my university library through an interlibrary loan. When the book arrived, I pounced on it, and read it through in one sitting, strangely disengaged with the content. Even the book cover looked unfamiliar, a fact that had increasingly begun to worry me as I progressed through the book. It wasn't until the end of this reading that I realized this particular *Planet of Death* was not the planet I had hoped for. I had requested the correct title by the wrong author, not anticipating that there could be more than one sixty-year-old book by this title. Arch's (1964) book, while oddly resonant of the book I was looking for, and narrated with similarly dated text, was not the book I was seeking, even though it, too, was also about a space mission of humans to an unexplored planet and it, too, followed the experiences of adult characters—a characteristic of the target book that I recalled during this reading even as my disillusionment with the Arch book was increasing. Snapping the cover shut, I tried to recall something more definitive about my particular *Planet of Death*. An image slowly surfaced from the original book: an alien, enveloping a space explorer to the death in its colourful tentacles. Arch's book contained no such scene and I knew my search must continue.

A second interlibrary loan was duly processed and in a few weeks—right at final exam time—a copy of Silverberg's *Planet of Death* awaited me on the loans shelf. I recognized the cover at once—a striking black background with white lettering and geometric figures. This was indeed the *Planet of Death* I had been seeking! I carried it straight into the exam I was invigilating that morning and no doubt caused some consternation if any students considered a potential relationship between this title and the context we shared at that time. I read a few pages

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during the invigilation period, and then galloped off to my office following the exam to complete an uninterrupted read.

Planet of Death Revisited

As I reread *Planet of Death* for the purpose of this self-study, my child-self was brought immediately to bear. Through the tunnel of the “external chronotope” (Brenna, 2010) created by this current reading of the novel, I remembered the thrill I felt through the twists and turns in the story—many of them high stakes for the characters involved. Field notes taken during this modern read are interspersed with exclamation marks. The first death! The second death! Would there be more? I knew there would! I navigated through the numerous deaths and deceptions, striking elements of the book’s plot that I had forgotten about over the years. And I remembered the delicious safety of knowing how various disasters unfolded. I also suddenly remembered the living room chair where I did most of my reading, its nubbly surface and a particular pillow I had embroidered that supported the book on my lap, and then the feeling of sitting with the book quite close to my face.

Study Methodology

As I explored the novel during this self-study, field notes kept during the contemporary reading were extended by further notes added once I had finished the book, and then considered for patterns and possible themes related to the original reading as well as the emerging chronotopic view of myself as a young reader. This qualitative self-study was framed by my original purpose to further understand my child self as I engaged in rereading, and then apply any understandings to elementary classroom literacy teaching and learning. Research using self-study methodology allows researchers to document “the personal practical knowledge they possess that contributes to our knowledge and understanding of teaching” (Pinnegar & Hamilton,

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2009, p.3). Self-study in Education is further supported by contemporary research studies that further develop its methodological framework (Mitchell, Weber, & O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2013). The mechanism I utilized to investigate the personal practical knowledge in my self-study was Bakhtin's (1981) literary chronotope, wielding it as a time-travel device to approach myself as a young reader.

Self-Study Findings

Following the data collection phase of the study, I applied Ross's (2001) five common elements of pleasure reading to information on my repeated early readings of *Planet of Death*, and assessed that none seemed important in this particular case. There wasn't a mood at the time of reading that I was drawing on to select this title, I had not used any particular sources to discover this book, I was not conscious of a particular subject interest or other element to match book choices to the reading experience desired, I hadn't noticed clues on the book to predict a satisfactory reading experience, and I hadn't considered access as an issue in locating this book. I somehow encountered this book on a library shelf, took it home, read it, and then simply adopted it as an important and ongoing read for a considerable amount of time. I did not share the book with anyone, and none of my friends read it. What other elements of pleasure reading could be applied, extending Ross's framework? A closer look at the internal chronotope might illuminate this further.

Chronotopic Summary

An internal chronotopic view.

I conjecture that the "internal" chronotope experienced as my younger self travelled through *Planet of Death* became what Birkerts (1994) calls "the shadow life of reading" (p. 98), producing a memory context related to my own identity which was sustained during the time

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period of the childhood rereading and has resonated long after my experiences forty years ago with this novel. A number of elements of the novel may have functioned as magnets for my young self: the fact that most of the characters were male may have appeared a nice contrast to my reading of princesses; the fact that the adult culture described in the novel was very different from the childhood culture in which I was immersed may also have played a part. All of the human characters in the novel had particular skill sets, including university-trained professions as yet ephemeral to me in my young state. And, of course, all of the characters were “old”—another potential opportunity to read far afield.

In addition to these ideas, the aspects of death and deception inherent in the book may have conjured other notably adult themes which were interesting to me as a young reader. Unusual in my previous childhood reading, many of the adults in this story ended up dead. Perhaps even the safety of being able to read such a book, while remaining alive and well, was reassuring. No doubt psychoanalysis would turn up other views on the nature of this rereading, but suffice it to say that the book itself remains a solid positive memory in my early reading life. Such “cruise-controlled” intellectual travel, offered through what Sturm (2001) calls an altered state of consciousness, and moving through the predictable territory of rereading, offered enjoyment and relaxation in addition to observations of an adult world as of yet unknown to me.

An “external” chronotopic view.

As I engaged with *Planet of Death* in this contemporary reading, I was fully aware of myself as a child-reader, engaging repeatedly with the same story. I could remember the living room chair in which I often sat, the jar of raisins that often accompanied me into reading experiences, the way the book rested on my ribbed tights. I could even contextualize other elements of the home—my mother milling about the kitchen, my father, stereotypically reading

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his newspaper, my older sister getting ready to go out. Interestingly, my other family members, including a brother away at university during that time period, were all adults, while I, the only younger child, sat reading a novel about adults.

This contemporary rereading thus provided a link to my own family history, a tunnel through time in which I was able to transcend time-space and settle, briefly, on myself as a middle-school reader and person. This experience equates with a previous suggestion of an “external” chronotope at work through an earlier self-study with another text and time (Brenna, 2010). While that time machine transported me back to myself as a twenty-year-old reader, the fact that I was able to achieve a decade earlier as part of this current project is of importance because both images—myself as a twenty-something, and myself as a nine-and-ten-year-old—were equally clear. No additional travel blurring occurred in relation to distance—an interesting formula.

Discussion and Implications for Reading Instruction

Throughout education, emphasis is applied to the evolution of identity through interaction with subject matter (Saskatchewan English Language Arts Curriculum, 2010). Outcomes in this regard are abstract, however—how might we explore identity through the texts we read? Is it only seeking characters who are windows and mirrors (Galda, 1998) or might we explore other ways of identity construction? Perhaps rereading is an activity through which our students might consider their storied pasts, locating themselves again and again through familiar books or contents that strike a chord.

When considering the history of reading, a discussion of rereading emerges as part of an earlier time and place in North America and around the world, although there has been scant research regarding the “family library as a social institution distinct from public libraries”

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(Buckridge, 2006, p. 389). Perhaps the “old fashioned” family library supported rereading in a manner unique to itself, and perhaps also this library conveyed intergenerational content to a variety of family members. In contrast, there may be factors in contemporary Education that limit or discourage potential rereading endeavours or explorations of characters whose ages vary from our own—certainly missing opportunities to fully consider the curricular topic of identity or even fully embrace Galda’s (1998) idea that we need books to operate as windows on the unfamiliar as well as mirrors into our own lives. .

What might be contemporary barriers to repeated readings? The current breadth of available materials might be an impediment in the simple vastness of the potential titles available. Why would we reread something when there are *this many* other new titles to explore? And why would we settle for books about various character ages when there are *huge numbers* of books about children the same ages as my students? Why indeed. It’s only when we consider our own reading preferences and trajectories that alternative answers to these redundant questions begin to make sense.

Findings from my self-study remind me how much my young self valued the portraits of adults, and adult considerations, presented by *Planet of Death*. The modern fixation that children prefer to read about their own age groups is quite possibly just that—a contemporary idea that is not actually based in the true responses of our children and one that could also be potentially discriminatory in terms of their actual reading interests and preferences.

Future exploration of children’s and young-adult literature through academic study should consider aspects of rereading and content that could apply in Education, widening our notion of rereading beyond its use as a simple strategy employed to promote literal comprehension and oral fluency. We might thus establish rereading as an important and routine

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practice, considering it as a possible foundation for motivated reading and the development of connections between literacy and lives. Preferences related to character ages, for example, could have a profound effect on the materials selected for classroom attention as well as encourage authors and publishers to consider wider, more desirable age ranges within literature for youth. Classroom (and public) libraries could be restructured to host all sorts of forms and formats, with picture books seen as valuable sites for identity construction in older readers as well as new materials for younger students.

Specific implications for change, directed to classroom practitioners and teacher educators, are as follows:

- remove barriers to reading “down” by encouraging early childhood materials as sites of identity construction for older students (See Appendix A for examples);
- seek classroom materials that present a variety of character ages as well as other aspects of diversity (see Appendix B for examples);
- model for our students the comfort of rereading, the familiar “cruise controlled” pleasure reading we do as adults and the rewards of deeper response when comprehension is easy, removing the stigma from reading simple or familiar titles; and
- specifically target identity topics through guided rereading where students are invited to select something they read in the past and consider “then and now” viewpoints. Kenneth Koch’s (1970) poetry frame “I use to be...but now...” might be an inspiring pattern for response.

Conclusion

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It was a wonderful thing to hold *Planet of Death* again during this self-study, albeit holding it a good deal closer to my face than in decades past thanks to my growing near-sightedness. Interestingly, while I located my childhood self between its pages, I can't say I was drawn to the writing or the story at all. While many children's books old and new are some of my most favourite reading materials, including titles like *Charlotte's Web*, *Planet of Death* does not share their artistry. In fact, I found the book and its characters particularly wooden. What was captivating were the memories of the child that *Planet of Death* conveyed back to me and that remain with me still—what I can only describe as an “external chronotope” in action.

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Tarkington, B. (1914). *Penrod*. New York: Doubleday.

Lang, A. (1889). *The blue fairy book*. New York: Dover.

Harris, Joel Chandler (1881). *Uncle Remus*. New York: D. Appleton & Company.

White, E. B. (1952). *Charlotte's web*. New York: Harper & Row.

Appendix A: Early Childhood and Junior Materials for Rereading by Middle Years

Students and Adults

Babbitt, N. (1975). *Tuck everlasting*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

Campbell, N. (2005). *Shi-shi-etko*. Toronto, ON: Groundwood.

Del Rizzo, S. (2017). *My beautiful birds*. Toronto, ON: Pajama Press.

Lionni, L. (1967). *Frederick*. New York: Pantheon.

White, E. B. (1952). *Charlotte's web*. New York: Harper & Row.

Appendix B: Contemporary Titles Presenting Older Characters

Picturebooks Presenting Older Characters

Campbell, N. (2017). *A Day with Yahyah*. Vancouver, BC: Tradewind.

Gregory, N. (1995). *How Smudge came*. Red Deer, AB: Red Deer College Press.

Lawson, J. (2017). *Uncle Holland*. Toronto, ON: Groundwood Books.

Nicholson, C. D. (2017). *Nipêhon = I wait*. Toronto, ON: Groundwood Books.

Rust, K. (2017). *Tricky*. Toronto, ON: Owlkids Books.

Rylant, C. (1996). *The old woman who named things*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace.

Silverstein, S. (1992). *The giving tree*. New York: HarperCollins.

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Thomas, P. M. (2017). *Nimoshom and his bus*. Winnipeg, MN: Highwater Press.

Junior/Middle-Grade Novels Presenting Older Characters

DiCamillo, K. (2006). *The miraculous journey of Edward Tulane*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.

Little, J. (2005). *Forward, Shakespeare*. Victoria, BC: Orca.

Wersba, B. (2011). *Walter, the story of a rat*. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside.